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The Otherworldly Gifts of Autism

Mystical Implementation of Facilitated Communication in the Ultra-Orthodox Community in Israel

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THE CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION OF AUTISM

Facilitated communication (FC) is a set of techniques designed to improve the communicative skills of children suffering from pervasive developmental disorders. Widely used during the late 1980s and early 1990s, its validity became the subject of a heated controversy. Without seeking to reopen this controversy, in this chapter we highlight a peculiar application of these techniques in the Haredi (ultra-orthodox) community in Israel. This implementation of FC offers the children's families a new, highly positive, perception of autism, while at the same time serving to reaffirm the validity of core values of the community. We collected the data throughout 1995–1996 in the context of a larger study dealing with communication patterns and boundary maintenance in the Haredi community in Israel.

Our case study points to ways in which mental disorders are culturally constituted and historically situated (e.g., Gaines, 1992; Kleinman, 1988). Autism is culturally malleable to a fairly limited extent—given, indeed, the pervasiveness of "primary" biological and psychological malfunctions. Nevertheless, even in such a case the particular systems of local knowledge in which the malfunction is embedded might substantially reconstitute it. We seek to show how in a given historical moment, specific mental disorders are selected and transformed into highly ritualized and stylized performances in a dramatic morality

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play encapsulating core dilemmas and contested values of the community (cf. Foucault, 1973). Thus by relying on a well-established sociological tradition originating in Durkheim, we try to highlight not only the individual implications of the usage of FC in the Haredi community, but also the ways this community (like other societies) relates to mental disorders as a form of social deviance and uses them to create integration, cohesion, and solidarity (Ben-Yehuda, 1985). Specifically, we are interested in the construction of autism as a rhetorical device and in the dialogical possibilities that this construction opens for reaffirming the core values of the society. Our focus is thus on the transactional process between center and periphery through which children suffering from severe disorders such as autism are appropriated and remade by central figures in the Haredi community in Israel.

Our case study demonstrates how bounded cultural enclaves (such as the Haredi community) become partially enmeshed in the interactive systems that constitute the modern world. This example also shows, however, the selective permeability of group boundaries in the age of global cultural flow. The fast (although not uncontested) adoption of augmentative communication aids by Haredim in Israel seems to support Appadurai's (1990: 8) contention that "technology... now moves in high speeds across various kinds of previously impervious boundaries." But this trafficking was not accompanied by a similar incorporation of the theoretical rationale underlying the original clinical use of FC. Rather, an extensive process of local adaptation or "indigenization" (Hannerz, 1989) reframed and realigned the technique and its rationale in keeping with the community's hegemonic values.

Our emphasis on interactive networks in the globalization model resonates with the multiple levels of communication generated by the introduction of FC to the Haredi community. Ostensibly, the technique is designed to improve the users' communication abilities. But beyond that, the networks provide the means for the intriguing dialogue aforementioned between moral agents of the social order and individuals suffering from autism, as well as for an intergroup dialogue with the secular world outside the community, and a metaphysical dialogue with the afterworld "above" it.

In what follows we present the controversy over FC and its implementation in the Haredi community, explain its unique novel religious rationale, examine the messages elicited in FC sessions in Haredi settings, and describe their relationship to core values and concerns of the community. Next, we turn to the clinical implications of FC for Haredi families. Lastly, we compare this form of FC with the clinical set of techniques from which it was borrowed, showing how the religious application may shed new light on clinical FC. The two versions are particularly similar, we argue, in their attempt to reconstitute the autistic children in a new, ostensibly more positive mold.

THE CONTROVERSY OVER FACILITATED COMMUNICATION

FC, first developed in the 1970s in Australia (Crossley, 1992), gained much popularity in the United States in the 1980s and early 1990s (Biklen, 1990). In FC sessions the facilitators provide a continuous physical assistance to the children, helping them to communicate by pointing to pictures or letters on a communication board, or by typing out messages on a computer keyboard. The mounting popularity of FC was counterbalanced by a subsequent wave of controlled experimental studies that failed to replicate the positive

effects attributed to the technique in a naturally occurring context. Reviews of these studies have usually echoed the unequivocal conclusion reached by Eberlin, McConnachie, Ibel, and Volpe: "At the present time there has not been one scientifically valid confirmatory finding supporting the claims that FC produces independent client-generated communication" (1993: 528; see also Jacobson, Mulick, & Schwartz, 1995). Using effective modes of experimental control, many of the studies have demonstrated that the communicative outputs attributed to the handicapped persons were in fact produced by the facilitators, probably without intent or awareness (e.g., Dillon, Fenlason, & Vogel, 1994; Eberlin, Ibel, & Jacobson, 1994; Montee, Miltenberger, & Wittrock, 1995). To the critical eye, this ample documentation of "facilitator influence" has reduced FC to "unwitting ventriloquism" (Routh, 1994).The produced messages were thus explained as stemming not from the children but from their facilitators.

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF FC IN THE HAREDI COMMUNITY IN ISRAEL

Since the beginning of 1995, a succession of reports in Israeli newspapers depicted the growing use of and subsequent controversy over FC in Haredi circles. Israeli Jews are distributed along a wide spectrum, from complete atheists to devout observants (Sobel & Beit-Hallahmi, 1991), and Haredim (more than 10% of the population) are located at the uttermost religious pole of this continuum. Like other religious fundamentalist groups, Haredim are marked by deep opposition to secular lifestyles—augmented by deliberate attempts to retain sociocultural life patterns as crystallized in traditional communities of earlier centuries (Heilman & Friedman, 1991). Haredim's twin spiritual ideals are the strict fulfillment of all religious precepts and the study (by men) of Jewish sacred texts, in religious academies. Of immense importance are thus the spiritual leaders of the community, ordained rabbis, whose moral authority and advice is sought and accepted without challenge.

The entrepreneurial role of strictly observant individuals in promoting a recently introduced, controversial procedure such as FC and their readiness to examine to that end a large quantity of data published in specialized professional journals, from which the Haredim are usually estranged, cannot be taken for granted. The acquaintance with popular television programs on FC that this promotion involved is particularly remarkable, given the pernicious image of television in the Haredi community and the general proscription to watch it. All this unusual reaching out and barrier crossing may suggest that FC was believed to hold a special promise for religious believers (and for those standing on the boundary between the secular and the religious world)—beyond the ambitious goal of improving the communication skills of severely incapacitated individuals. The essence of this significance became crystal clear with the first media reports on FC in the Haredi settings. The communication was geared to otherworldly planes; the impaired children were perceived as mediums susceptible to supernormal agencies and able to impart knowledge derived from them.

According to Israeli religious newspapers, this esoteric use of FC had been cultivated in Haredi circles in the United States and was then imported to Israel. In the new surrounding it has been promoted by a group of committed individuals and voluntary associations situated in Jerusalem and Bnai Brak, the two urban strongholds of Israeli ultra-orthodoxy.

The individual advocates of the system, rabbis coming from a variety of orthodox backgrounds, have been primarily engaged in FC sessions conducted in private family settings. The voluntary associations, less inhibited in their eagerness to publicize the elicited communications, specialized in public displays of FC sessions in front of large audiences. In both settings the overwhelming majority of the message senders were children coming from observant families. Likewise, most of the facilitators were women from strictly religious backgrounds. The sessions were run by the religious promoters who presented the questions to the children. Mystically oriented rabbis and religious activists seeking to bring secular Jews back to religion were particularly instrumental in promoting FC. A wide plethora of tools has been employed to document and distribute the communications extracted in private and public performances, to expound their meaning, and to amplify their reverberations. These included posters, articles in newspapers and periodicals, brochures, lectures, and even audiocassettes and videocassettes for rent and sale.

This propagation of "metaphysical FC" in the Haredi community was not left unanswered. A series of critical articles in Haredi newspapers, bearing titles such as "autism and charlatanism" or "autism without mysticism," have cautioned against the esoteric use of FC by mobilizing against it venerated rabbinical figures, as well as observant physicians, psychologists, and educators. Many of the arguments of the religious professionals resonated with the methodological caveats in the scientific reviews of the phenomenon, while the rabbinical figures reacted to FC from the classic hyperconservative stance, claiming that any system of ideas or set of procedures not grounded in Jewish tradition should be shunned. These critical voices, however, have not been successful in discrediting the phenomenon and in stopping its spread. FC continues to thrive in religious circles, as children suffering from autism disclose through it messages from otherworldly planes.

THE RELIGIOUS RATIONALE OF FC IN THE HAREDI CONTEXT

Judging from their publications, the Haredi promoters of FC are well versed in the clinical literature on FC. But they promulgate it in a very selective way, focusing on the reported dramatic improvements in communication skills while seeking to minimize the wealth and weight of disproving data. In dealing with the alleged achievements of FC, the promoters confound scientific and religious discourses. The brochures and cassettes they distribute always start with detailed depictions of the professional history of the procedure. This introduction appears rigorous and sober minded as it focuses on the empirical evidence in support of FC and on the professional experience and academic background of its proponents. But the reliance on scientific status symbols appears as part of a rhetorical scheme hiding specious reasoning, since it always ends with a narrative twist. In the last analysis, the religious reports assert that the scientific–positivist paradigm, despite its enumerated achievements, fails to account for the entire gamut of FC effects. As phrased by one of the publications, "We are facing a phenomenon scientists have no idea how to cope with."

The shift from scientific to religious idioms is marked by refraining allegedly inexplicable FC effects as "miracles" which include anecdotal reports on advanced literacy without prior exposure to reading and writing, fluent communication in foreign languages, elicitation of coherent messages without staring at the keyboard, communication during

states of deep coma, absorbing written material and conducting complex calculations in enormous speed, and knowledge of Divine Truth. All these "miracles," except the last one, are elaborations on arguments raised by facilitators (and popularized by the media) without manifest reference to otherworldly reality and metaphysical entities. The religious promulgations capitalize on these extraordinary anecdotal reports, presenting them as rigorous scientific findings, only to expose the limitations and short-sightedness of the empirical perspective.

Jewish texts are cited to support the Haredi exegesis of FC. One example is the legend about the embryo in its mother's womb that "looks and sees from one end of the world to the other." This amazing farsightedness is correlated with no less amazing insight or introspection, as the embryo is also believed to master the entire corpus of the Holy Scriptures. A metaphorical reading of another phrase—"A candle burns above its (the embryo's) head"—serves as a mediating link in accounting for these prodigal embryonic capacities. The candle stands for the soul, viewed as the Godly element in human existence, which, in the embryonic state, still enjoys a free-floating, extracorporeal position. As a Divine spark unconstrained by material limitations, nothing physical or spiritual is beyond the pale of the soul. This blissful state is short lived, however. From the moment of birth, the soul, encased in a limiting bodily habitat, is bereft of the prenatal spectacular faculties.

Following the erasure of the prenatal Platonic traces of erudition and unobstructed vision at birth, learning becomes strenuous and slow. The laborious process of secondary acquisition is mediated by the brain which, being a material organ, is more limiting than enabling. Cherished by science as the site of high mental processes, the generator of human intellect and creativity, the brain is pondered here as a confining device, a screen, which distances humans from their Divine source, the pure omniscient soul. The knowledge it can grasp, perforce constrained by human inherent fallibility, is but a small fraction of the endless primordial wisdom lost upon parturition.

This line of reasoning renders another Talmudic statement comprehensible: "Since the Temple was destroyed, prophecy has been taken from prophets and given to fools and children." The injured brains of children suffering from autism viewed in mundane life as the source of unending misery, constitute an asset from a mystical viewpoint, since they allow privileged access to their God-given soul. Dialectically, the more incapacitated the individual, as reflected in both physical and mental dysfunctioning, the more permeable the bodily screen which effectively separates normal people from their Divine, supernormal source. This dialectical process is responsible for the "miraculous" performances of children suffering from autism, in the Haredi FC sessions. From a mystico-religious perspective, the procedure is an effective tool for bypassing the afflicted body and making direct contact with the pure soul. Through this contact, extraordinary information from otherworldly spheres may be obtained which, as one of the brochures puts it, "enables us to get rid of any doubt regarding the foundations of our faith."

"WHAT DOES THE SOUL SAY" IN FC SESSIONS?

Cloaked in this metaphysical garment, the Haredi FC provides a meeting ground for the transcendental and the mundane—which is otherwise uncommon in Judaism. Jewish mystics have sought to induce themselves into ecstatic and contemplative states, in which

they could experience the presence of the Divine (Idel, 1988). But these experiences were typically private events, limited to mystical virtuosi, and highly ineffable. FC sessions, in contrast, often take place in public settings, in front of a large audience, and their messages are lucid and easily conveyable. These messages, "the secrets of the soul," are disclosed by the impaired child with the facilitator's assistance in response to questions addressed by the rabbi in charge of the session.

The most compelling theme dealt with is divine providence. The children report that they are strongly aware of God's existence and, based on the experiences of their souls in the afterworld, are cognizant of his omnipresence and guidance. Having faith in God, loving and worshipping him, and following his will in learning and piety are depicted as the most important things in life. These objectives are not external prescriptions, but rather reflections of human intrinsic motivation. The children, stripped of the distorting constraints of base bodily desires, are able to articulate through the facilitation the genuine wishes of their souls—thus providing evidence as to the innate spirituality of human nature.

Once God's immanence and omnipresence (in the world as well as in humans) has been established, it is important to reconcile it with the miserable fate of the children. Since the notion of divine providence, based on the moral principle of divine restitution as individually geared to each believer is a cardinal pillar of faith in Judaism, the agony and pain of the children and their families must be accounted for. This is particularly true in the case of autism, in which early onset discredits any explanation focusing on the victim's sins. One of the publications responded to this moral challenge with the following generalization, based on repeated messages from the children: "All the brain-damaged without exception know that they had lived in this world before, know their former name and parents' names, and *know the sin for which they came to this world in such a miserable form.* They all know that they did not come to this world to do penance, since they know the ultimate truth and do not have (the option of free) choice. They came to the world simply and solely to endure this anguish, which for them is a rectification of the sin for which they came into being" (italics added).

As in other religious systems, the notion of reincarnation, or the transmigration of souls serves to account for apparent aberrations in the principle of divine retribution, embodied, in this case, in the mutilation of innocent children. The possibility of rectification makes the Jewish variant of reincarnation a demonstration of divine grace, given the opportunity imparted on the transmigrated soul to improve its transcendental status in the hereafter. The vicissitudes of the souls in their former incarnations and in afterlife were minutely portrayed in the FC sessions with special emphasis on their sins. Among the transgressions responsible for the message senders' present wretchedness, moral breaches on the interpersonal level were particularly noticed. Of these, verbal misbehaviors, from gossiping to vilifying and slandering, appeared as a cardinal sin. The salience of this category of misdeeds in the context of autism reflects (and further reinforces) the principle of divine retribution: those who had sinned with their mouth were doomed to suffer from gross communication impairments in their new reincarnation. Other reported sins included adultery, embezzlement, and apostasy. The depictions of the souls' wanderings in the afterworld focused on the celestial jury and the penalties it imposed on the culprits.

The information regarding the children's former incarnations, vices, and punishments is elicited in the course of a staccato succession of questions and answers. The publications, claiming to bring an accurate documentation of the sessions, present these dialogues

verbatim. Less typically, a coherent "autobiography" of an impaired person, presented as a confessional memoir, would be elicited in response to a request to relate a life (or rather former-life) story. In both genres the message senders express total acceptance of the impairment, presented as an opportunity to ameliorate the transcendental status of their souls, and beseech others in their vicinity to subscribe to this point of view. In unfolding the suffering they endure because of their deformities and limitations, however, the impaired launch pointed criticism against the rejection and contempt that are their share in the wider society. Their plea for human tolerance and compassion (rather than heavenly mercy) resonates with similar complaints raised by autistic and other afflicted children in non-religious FC sessions.

The privileged access of the impaired children to their souls endows them with special divinatory skills amply tested in FC sessions. Even though the publications admonish against engaging the children in petty matters, the personal sphere is represented in the communications in attempts to disclose the causes of individual life problems, from illness and economic misfortune to truancy, heavy smoking, and marred family relationships, or the unfolding of future events, such as winning in the lottery and success in the religious academy. The fact that the disclosed causes always pertain to the religious domain attenuates the relative insignificance ascribed to these mundane concerns. The wide spectrum of the questions in FC sessions, spanning the trivial and the sublime, is illustrated by the following passage taken from a dialogue with a 7-year-old autistic child.

Question: Is the presence of the Divine clear to you?
Answer: It is as clear to me as the reality of sunlight is clear to you.
Q: Why did you come to the world in this form?
A: There is no suffering without sin, and I sinned in forsaking the study of the Torah.
Q: Why have so many troubles been occurring recently?
A: Because of [the prevalence] of "evil tongue" and sexual relations with menstruating women.
Q: Why are you crying?
A: Because I can see through you.
Q: Why have there been so many cases of divorce recently?
A: Because adultery breeds divorce.
Q: Is God with us now?
A: He is all over.
Q: What precept should be emphasized to draw the redemption nearer?
A: Showing love without expecting reward.
Q: When I reached Rabbi Elazar [a well-known charismatic rabbi] I went back and refused to receive his blessing. Why?
A: Your soul, contaminated by your body, drove you away.
Q: Is midnight prayer conducive to drawing the redemption nearer?
A: It is conducive to both personal rectification and (collective) redemption.
Q: Is it recommended to work and study at the same time?
A: [Yes]. It is correct to do both. Laboring hard on both of them may cast vices into oblivion.
Q: What about seances?
A: [The messages are] valid. But it is forbidden to conjure the dead.

Q: How to choose between schools?
A: The pupil should decide, following his own heart.
Q: Is it permitted to engage in Karate?
A: [No]. This is a vain entertainment of the gentiles.

The controversy over FC within the Haredi camp reverberates in the sessions as well. Some promoters, apparently ill at ease with the hostile approach of some renowned religious authorities, extract messages from the children that support the use of FC and praise its achievements.

Many of the sessions, particularly in public settings, are pervaded by strong apocalyptic and revivalistic tones. In fact, the disclosure of personal and political matters merely serves as a prelude to highly charged communications asserting that redemption is imminent and urging the people around to repent and thus facilitate its coming. Repentance, in the form of meticulous religious observance and moral awakening, is presented both as a prerequisite for the coming of the Messiah, without whom salvation will not unfold, and as a last-moment opportunity to be spared of God's wrath. These messages clearly constitute the emotional climax of the encounters and, in the eyes of the organizers, are their *raison d'etre.* Their significance is indicated by the disproportionate space assigned in the publications to gloomy depictions of the plights and predicaments dialectically preceding redemption, to spirited exhortations to go back to the fold and repent, to frightening admonitions portraying in vivid colors the terrible fate facing those who would not, and to shining promises about the eternal bliss expecting those who would. A special periodical, designated "The Last Words for the Last Generation," of which two issues have already appeared, is devoted almost exclusively to dispatching these messages. The quotations on the cover of the second issue, taken from recorded FC sessions, convey the sense of fervor and urgency imbued in these apocalyptic messages:

- We who look asleep come to wake up those dormant in deceitfulness.
- This is a frightening and sad situation that begs for redemption. The world in its present form is doomed to disappear in the near future and we must—a life or death matter—to make Jews repent. This is the task of the present generation.
- This is the end.
- In a little while the world will cope with the final ordeal.
- God saves the souls just before the very end.
- Those opposing our mission will not be able to stop us nor to extinguish the truth.
- You live like drunks, not paying attention to the signs God is sending to you.

While the *dramatis personae* in the sessions—the organizers and most of the facilitators and the children—were coming from religious backgrounds, the catchment population of "metaphysical FC" has been secular no less than religious. The repeated messages to repent, in particular, which make the public sessions akin to Evangelical churches' revivalistic meetings, are primarily outer-oriented, even though the function of invigorating those within the Haredi and larger religious fold should not be disregarded. Given that in their communications the children posit the unity and solidarity of the Jewish people as a key for salvation, their messages to the nonreligious alternate between beseechment and admonition. Addressed rather than excluded in order to expedite the coming of the Messiah, they are also threatened with eternal damnation if they do not yield to the messages.

CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS OF METAPHYSICAL FC

Beyond the social significance of FC in strengthening core values of the Haredi community as mentioned previously, metaphysical FC, while far from directly ameliorating the incapacitated children's pervasive dysfunctioning, might put them in a new, positive light in the eyes of their parents, caretakers, and the community at large. After all, the children are employed as mediums with superhuman divinatory capacities owing to their unmediated access to their pure soul. Empirically, however, it is still an open question whether this positive reframing of the children's situation affects their parents in a significant, enduring way. Does metaphysical FC performances cognitively restructure the parents' perceptions of and attitudes toward their children and consequently make their handling of the children easier in any significant way?

Our study did not include observations of autistic children in their home environments, nor did we interview parents or relatives of autistic children in the Haredi community. Fortunately, however, we now have access to preliminary data based on a set of 30 in-depth interviews with such parents (primarily mothers) carried out by Michal Shaked, a doctoral student in the department of psychology at the Hebrew University. From this material, we have a better glimpse of the parents' evaluations of FC effects on both clinical and metaphysical levels, although it should be noted that these data convey the Haredi parents' discourse regarding their experiences with the children. We do not have empirical data based on observations to corroborate these verbal articulations.

All but four interviewees were familiar with FC and most of them referred to it spontaneously in the course of the interview. This may be taken as an indication of how ubiquitous and salient FC had become in the Haredi community. Moreover, half (15) of the interviewees reported actual attempts to communicate with their own children through this technique. However, only seven of these interviewees reported that FC was successful in some way, and most of them qualified this success to the spiritual, metaphysical level. Only three have maintained that FC was effective clinically, in improving somewhat the children's communication skills. The heated controversy regarding FC in the Haredi community was also reflected in this sample, as six of the parents expressed ambivalence or unequivocal opposition to the technique. Some of these parents based their skepticism on disappointing FC sessions in which the credibility of the facilitator could be easily put into question. Still, we should not disregard the positive effects metaphysical FC might have on some parents by the positive reframing of the children's status. Two mothers even reported that the FC experience had radically transformed their perception, attitude, and relationship with the child. This is how the first of them described this change:

> I think that this (FC) generated a huge transformation in my attitude towards him (her autistic son). People kept saying that he could understand ... that perhaps there is something in him. But I couldn't see anything. This really broke my heart, it was very depressing. But when they started with FC, he started saying things (in a FC session) ... he said it very nicely, and I suddenly discovered... it was a kind of a pathway to his inner essence, I discovered what was in him. Since then, I started loving him very much.

The second argued that

> [T]his (FC) gave me much strength ... it is encouraging that I have a girl that I can understand, that she is not merely ... (an object)... That there is something real here ... that she is capable of understanding ... this gives me a feeling that I deal with a human being. It made me love her more, it made me more attached to her.

Despite these reported effects of metaphysical FC, the overall data gathered from the Haredi parents seem to indicate that for most of them the "triumph of the pure soul" ostensibly manifested in FC sessions served only as a limited resource in day to day coping with the harsh reality of the children's pervasive deficits.

BETWEEN CLINICAL AND METAPHYSICAL FC

As a peculiar mystical elaboration, "metaphysical FC" may be taken as a measure for the cultural distinctiveness of the Haredi community. At the same time, however, it also serves as a reminder that even a religiously fundamentalist enclave does not altogether insulate itself from the wider secular society within which it is uncomfortably situated. Ambitious as the objectives of clinical FC may appear, particularly in the context of dramatic displays of improved communicative skills and rich inner lives of severely incapacitated children, they seem pale in comparison with the paranormal claims of mystically induced FC. And yet, notwithstanding the gap between pseudo-scientific FC and its metaphysical counterpart, the similarities between the systems transcend common procedure and administration. Particularly, the emergence of metaphysical FC may shed light on the "mystico-religious" aspects of clinical FC. In both settings FC is used to bypass gross physical deficits to give voice to hidden aspects of the psyche. This basic resemblance is clouded by epistemologically divergent rationales. According to the psychological model underlying clinical FC, the hidden psychic aspects to be retrieved are located in the brain-mind, whereas the mystical model separates between the disembodied divine soul and the brain-mind and assumes that the more damaged the brain the louder and clearer the voice of the omniscient soul. It might be suggested that the two systems use different idioms of transcendence, hidden and internal in the clinical case (cf. Shweder, 1991), exteriorized and cosmological in the metaphysical case. Yet the boundary between the two may at time become blurred, as terms prevalent in the professional discourse indicating transcendence in the first sense (e.g., "silent wisdom" in the case of autism) may be imbued with "spiritual" overtones.

The near-miraculous accomplishments claimed for FC in clinical settings, the strong emotions and moral concerns that the procedure has instigated, and the *"veritable religiose adherence by its most extreme proponents"* (Jones, 1994: 492; italics added)—all these serve to cloak clinical FC in a near-mystical atmosphere. It might be argued that in the secularized version of transcendence reflected in clinical FC the mystique of the mute self—creatively intelligent, poetically sensitive, yet trapped in a broken body and bereft of the means to articulate and express the richness of its inner life—resonates with the divine spark that constitutes the soul in metaphysical FC. In the same vein, the image of clinical FC as an empowering technique put forth to liberate autistic children from the dark recesses of their mental prison by assisting them to communicate and realize their inner potentials resonates with the soteriological messages that the children convey in metaphysical FC, related to their imminent salvation from the sins they had committed in previous incarnations, their happy compliance with God's harsh verdict, and their exalted status as prophetic messengers.

It is interesting to note that in both settings, the children's messages are marked by a strong sermonizing accent. This moralizing draws the communications in the clinical

setting closer to the religious exhortations of the children in the Haredi context. Moral complaints over the ill treatment of invalids and misfits are prevalent in both forms of FC. In clinical settings allegations of physical and sexual abuse have become particularly noted, further embittering the controversy over FC. Without going into the specific contents of these allegations, it might be argued that in the context of psychological (inner and hidden) transcendence, the retrieval of covert sexual traumas appears as the secularized equivalent of the unraveling of mystical secrets in metaphysical FC. In Haredi settings the allegations against abusers have been generalized to charges lamenting the growing moral deterioration and nonobservance and denouncing many religious transgressions. Intriguingly, in an oft-quoted case study of sexual abuse allegations, made through facilitation (Bligh & Kupperman, 1993:532) "a religious value system and mention of God was evidenced even though the child had received no religious education." It might be concluded that in both settings, FC enables disabled children to appear as resolute moral critics of their respective milieus.

The optimistic and humanitarian tenor of clinical FC has been retained and even enhanced in the religious setting. Secular and observant proponents alike emphasize, beyond the technical improvement in communication that facilitation brings forth, favorable change in the children's status and stronger acceptance by their parents. But beyond that, metaphysical FC endows the children with a distinctive transcendental aura, highlighting their access to their omniscient souls and their exalted stance as intermediaries with the hereafter, In secular settings FC is viewed as conducive to disclosing human potentials which, at best, may put disabled children on a par with normal ones. Metaphysical FC further magnifies the position of the children, refraining their afflictions as an innate moral asset that even great rabbinical figures do not naturally possess. The religious publications amply depict the favorable attitudinal transformation that parents of disabled children have undergone once they became aware of their children's privileged mediational status and superhuman abilities. The humane, benevolent orientation toward autism that the supporters of metaphysical FC display stands at odds with the traditional attitude toward mental disorders and physical stigma in the Haredi community characterized by shame, denial, and concealment. The change may be viewed as the tacit influence of modern life facilitated by the tremendous toll that physical and mental stigma cast on the ultra-orthodox family. Traditionally, the exposure of such blemish could tarnish all family members and particularly harm the prospects of finding a worthy spouse through matchmaking (Goshen-Gottstein, 1987).

Whether clinical or metaphysical, the redemptive presumptions of FC have met with a fierce opposition in both settings. The scientific skepticism regarding the efficacy of FC was reiterated in Haredi circles. And in both settings the moral preaching of FC proponents, emphasizing the humane aspects of the procedure and the hope it has been giving to the afflicted and their families, was countervailed by criticism accentuating the damage that unrealistic expectations regarding the children's abilities might cause their families. The public sessions of metaphysical FC have drawn most of the fire in the religious camp. They were denigrated as circus-like performances in which the children's precarious well-being was put at additional risk because of their harsh exposure to the limelight. Judging from the interviews of Haredi parents of autistic children, it seems that the enthusiastic claims of the entrepreneurs of metaphysical FC are overstated. Most of the parents reported that the improvement following FC session was modest at best. In a few cases, however, parents

reported a dramatic change in their attitude toward the children following their participation in the sessions. In any case, it should be noted that although some of them had severe doubts as to the validity of FC, none reported negative effects as a result of exposing the children to FC.

The metaphysical halo that FC gained in the Haredi community situates the controversy over the technique in a broad cultural context—which goes beyond the question of sheer scientific validity. The juxtaposition of autism and Jewish ultra-orthodoxy constitutes a dramatic encounter between nature and culture. Autism, one of the least penetrable human ailments, is a pervasive, biologically based ("natural") disorder. In contrast, the Jewish ultra-orthodox community, with its profound commitment to the all-encompassing Law, hardly leaves any aspect of life outside the pale of culture. What happens when autism strikes this community? In this chapter we tried to show that, while the multiple disruptive behaviors of the children do not disappear, the metaphysical rationale of FC opens unexpected possibilities for refraining these behaviors in a novel, more positive cast.

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